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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: LATEST VIGILANTE KILLINGS IN CEBU - NO END IN SIGHT

REF: A. MANILA 0312

[B](#). 04 MANILA 5220

[C](#). 04 MANILA 4331

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Summary executions of suspected criminals by "death squads" in Cebu are continuing at an alarming rate. According to media reports, suspected vigilantes have killed at least 41 people since December 2004. Civil society groups have condemned the extrajudicial killings, but much of the public appears willing to tolerate them as an expedient means of combating crime. So far, police have not arrested any perpetrators in any of the attacks. End Summary.

Vigilantes Continue Their Bloody Campaign

[1](#)2. (U) The death count of suspected criminals continues to rise in Cebu, the second largest city in the Philippines, where at least 41 people have been killed since December 2004, according to media reports. (Note: Police investigators claim that only about thirty of these are cases of vigilante killings. End note) On April 10, a lone gunman onboard a motorcycle fatally shot Erwin Arquillano, who had just been released from jail for robbery. On April 1, an unidentified man shot and killed Misael Lopez, whom local residents had reported to be a thief in his village. On the same day, a masked gunman murdered Noel Canoy, who had been detained twice in the Bagong Buhay (New Life) Rehabilitation Center (BBRC) for substance abuse, pick pocketing, armed robbery, and burglary. Another former inmate of BBRC, Edgar Caballero, died from gunshot wounds after an unidentified man shot him on March 29. Caballero had also been detained in BBRC several times between 2002 and 2004 for illegal possession of a firearm.

Church, Lawyers, and Civic Groups Condemn Killings

[1](#)3. (U) The Catholic Church in Cebu, led by Archbishop Ricardo Cardinal Vidal, and the Cebu Chapter of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) criticized Cebu City Mayor Thomas Osmena and condemned the extrajudicial killings in the city. Cardinal Vidal has forcefully denounced the summary executions in his homilies and through the archdiocese's newsletter, urging Cebuanos to reject the "culture of death." The IBP passed a resolution in January 2005 urging the Cebu City Police Office to arrest the perpetrators of these summary executions and to help solve criminality in the community in accordance with the rule of law. Lawyers and civil society groups formed a multi-sectoral alliance against the rise in vigilante killings in Cebu on January 31, 2005. The alliance announced plans to create a speaker's bureau publicly to explain its position against the killings.

Suspected Police Involvement

[1](#)4. (U) The series of summary executions began on December 23, 2004, two days after Mayor Osmena announced the creation of the "Hunter Team," a special squad of police tasked to go after criminal elements in the city. Osmena also offered a reward of 20,000 pesos (370 USD) to the police force for every criminal "permanently disabled and neutralized." The mayor has denied any involvement by him or the Hunter Team in any of the summary executions, while noting that, as a result of the vigilante killings, crime in Cebu has gone down.

[1](#)5. (U) The Secretary of Interior and Local Government, Angelo Reyes, has ordered the Cebu City Police immediately to arrest any individuals belonging to vigilante groups thought to be involved in the killings of both convicted and suspected criminals. Senators Manuel Villar and Richard Gordon also warned the Cebu police force to stop summary executions of suspected criminals.

16. (U) Cebu Governor Gwendolyn Garcia has publicly supported Osmena's Hunter Team, saying that a "chilling message" must be sent to culprits who thwart government efforts to keep peace and order. The Cebu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) also expressed its strong support to the Hunter Team, stating that the promotion of peace and security is a vital component in the city's economic development initiatives. Even the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) Regional Director (Region 7) Alejandro Alonso lauded the creation of the Hunter Team and the mayor's reward program to police officers who apprehend notorious criminals, albeit emphasizing the need for safeguards to prevent abuse of official authority.

17. (U) In a meeting on April 6 with new Director General of the Philippine National Police General Arturo C. Lomibao, Pol/C expressed serious concern about extrajudicial killings, noted that the USG reported at length on this subject in our annual report to Congress on human rights, and warned of possible consequences for US assistance programs to security forces. General Lomibao promised that the police would investigate such cases.

18. (SBU) Comment: Many, perhaps even a majority of Cebu residents appear to support the Mayor's tough stance against crime, especially appreciative of the drop in crime rates. As long as local officials believe that the public will tolerate such extreme measures, they are likely to continue at least tacitly to sanction such killings, despite our repeated expressions of concern.

RICCIARDONE